

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON D.C. - On the eve of the one year anniversary of naming his son as governor of Najran province, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia should immediately order the release of Hadi Al-Mutif, one of the longest serving religious prisoners in the world, said the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

Mr. Al-Mutif, a Shi'a Ismaili Muslim from Najran in southwestern Saudi Arabia, has been in prison for more than 16 years for an offhand remark he made as a teenager in 1993 that was deemed blasphemous by a Saudi court. In 1996 he was convicted and originally sentenced to death for apostasy, despite the fact that he remains a Muslim. Lawyers and experts familiar with the case have said that the judge was biased against Ismaili Muslims and that Mr. Al-Mutif's trial was neither fair nor transparent. Mr. Al-Mutif has alleged physical abuse and mistreatment during his 16 years of incarceration.

Under Saudi government interpretation of Islamic law, criminal charges can be levied against individuals for defaming, denigrating, insulting, offending, disparaging, and blaspheming Islam, often resulting in gross human rights violations.

"This is a classic case where a member of a disfavored religious minority was targeted by authorities and given an excessively harsh punishment by a flawed judicial system," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "Nevertheless, there have been a number of occasions over the years where King Abdullah has pardoned individuals convicted of apostasy and blasphemy. Mr. Al-Mutif's case should be no different."

In November 2008, King Abdullah removed the governor of Najran. One year ago, on March 26, 2009, he appointed his son, Prince Mishaal, as governor of the Najran province, where Mr. Al-Mutif remains in prison. It was widely reported that the previous governor was highly discriminatory toward Ismaili Muslims. The majority of the nearly one million Ismaili Muslims in Saudi Arabia live in the Najran province.

Last August, King Abdullah ordered the release of 17 Ismaili Muslims in Najran who were imprisoned unjustly for nearly 10 years. In addition, Ismaili activist Ahmad Turki Al-Saab was released in September after serving 18 months in prison for circulating a petition in May 2008 seeking the removal of the previous governor of Najran.

However, in September 2009, Mr. Al-Mutif was sentenced to another five years in prison when a video tape that was smuggled out of prison was broadcast. In the tape, Mr. Al-Mutif criticized the Saudi judicial system and the country's poor human rights record.

USCIRF, the U.S. State Department, and international human rights groups have all found that Ismaili Muslims suffer severe discrimination and abuse by Saudi authorities.

“If King Abdullah wants to be taken seriously as a promoter of religious tolerance on the international stage, he must first take steps to right the ship at home,” said Commissioner Imam Talal Eid. “Ordering Mr. Al-Mutif’s immediate release would be one small step in the right direction.”

USCIRF has raised Mr. Al-Mutif’s case repeatedly over the years. During a 2007 visit to Saudi Arabia, USCIRF was told by high-level Saudi government officials that Mr. Al-Mutif’s case would be resolved soon. Nearly three years after those assurances, Mr. Al-Mutif remains in prison, much of the time in solitary confinement. Mr. Al-Mutif has attempted to commit suicide, and his psychological and physical health remain a serious concern.

Saudi Arabia is one of the world’s worst abusers of human rights and religious freedom, and, since 2004, has been named by the State Department as a “country of particular concern” for ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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